Anglo-Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval (Urban)

by Brian Ayers

I.Introduction

Towns are complex and diverse institutions with complex and diverse relationships to their hinterlands. This complexity and diversity increases with time, leading to the existence of numerous discrete palimpsests, each with extraordinary potential for enhancing understanding of human society, economy and culture.

East Anglia is fortunate in that it possesses a wealth of historic towns, many originating in the pre-Conquest period, each with considerable (and, in some cases, great) archaeological potential. This potential is characterised not simply by buried stratigraphic deposits and artefacts but also by topography and built structures, the detailed interdisciplinary study of which can provide wide-ranging evidence of social processes and actions.

The range of evidence is so great that, in order for this regional framework to form an effective outline, it is structured under five broad headings: Demography (looking at population density, distribution and structure); Social Organisation (examining settlement, ranking, status and urban institutions); Economy (outlining craft production, technological innovation, exchange and communications); Culture and Religion (exploring art and religion); and Environment.

The periods to be examined are as follows: Middle Saxon (650–850); Late Saxon (850–1066); medieval (1066–1600); and post-medieval (1620–1820). These period definitions have been chosen in order to provide a document which allows the urban perspective to be compared with the framework for rural society.

II. Demography

The relationship of demographic indicators to the revival of urbanism in post-Roman East Anglia has been but little explored. Darby (1952) remains the most important synthetic work for the early period although increasingly there is evidence from archaeological work in both urban and rural areas which could be used to provide information on probable patterns of population change and the implications for urban growth. This calls for greater interaction between methodologies and research aims for rural and urban sites in order to maximise potential and increase understanding of the demographic pressures which affect urban growth.

Allied to this is the study of settlement distribution, the relationship of proto-urban and urban settlements to the rural hinterland and the density of population within settlements.

Within towns the potential of archaeological data for exploring the development of urban populations needs to be considered actively, with the examination and definition of methodologies for assessing populations and population structure. This is particularly important for Middle Saxon and Late Saxon towns, where archaeological evidence will comprise the bulk of the available data, but the opportunity also exists for archaeological methodologies to test the implications of historical data in the medieval and post-medieval periods. Recent work by historians such as Rutledge (1988) can imply considerable variation on traditional assumptions about medieval populations, with impacts on demographic considerations such as housing and provisioning.

For the post-medieval period, often one of considerable demographic and other change in towns, there is great potential for archaeological study of deposits, buildings and processes to complement the increasing documentary evidence (as outlined in Ayers 1991).

III. Social Organisation

With the exception of Ipswich (Wade 1993), there has been little work on the establishment of towns in the Middle Saxon period in East Anglia. Much remains to be achieved in terms of basic data collection and model testing across the region. Emphasis needs to be placed on centres such as Cambridge, Norwich, Thetford and Colchester (especially given the apparent absence of Middle Saxon activity at this last location) but the possibility of proto-urban settlement at other, smaller, sites should not be discounted. In this context, the effect of London also needs to be considered, particularly for the southern part of East Anglia, an effect which clearly grows in later centuries.

The study of urban growth needs to establish social context and here the relationship of royal vills and other high status sites to early urban settlement should be a fruitful area of study. Examples from Essex and Suffolk can be cited but other potential sites exist elsewhere (for instance at Thorpe, an important manor to the immediate east of Norwich).

The impact of the Danes on urban life in East Anglia must be assessed (see Clarke and Ambrosiani1995 for Danish urbanism). There is considerable tangential evidence for Danish activity at Thetford, Norwich, Ipswich, Cambridge, Colchester and other places but a great deal more research is needed before the scale of Danish activity can be understood. It seems probable that the Danes were a formative influence on the early growth of Norwich (Ayers 1996) and this is unlikely to be an isolated example.

Late Saxon growth is both better documented and generally better understood. A number of burhs seem to have been founded in Essex in the early 10th century (such as Witham, Maldon and the re-establishment of urban life in Colchester). Other burhs are known at Hertford, Kingbury and Huntingdon and one probably existed at Cambridge. Fortifications in both Ipswich and Norwich of suspected Danish date could have been re-used for 10th-century burhs. In addition there are a number of settlements which seem to have burghal status, such as Horndon and Newport in Essex and possibly Tasburgh in

Figure 10 Location of places mentioned in the text: Anglo-Saxon, medieval, post-medieval (urban)

Norfolk, but which subsequently shrank to be little more than villages.

Complex social systems seem to have appeared in burghal settlements during the 10th century although the generally poor East Anglian documentation from the period renders archaeological evidence the more important. It is known from the *Liber Eliensis* that the towns of Norwich, Ipswich, Thetford and Cambridge were of such status by the 980s that their citizens did not need witnesses and it is also known that mints existed at all four locations. There were 10th-century mints at Colchester and Maldon and, by the 11th century, mints too at Huntingdon, Hertford, Sudbury and Bury St Edmunds.

Information from evidence as diverse as church foundations and street pattern metrology is already helping to identify stages of urban growth. The complexity of the problem, however, is perhaps best illustrated by Thetford where it is still not possible to characterise, even in general terms, the chronology, distribution and social status of occupation across the borough despite the site being largely an open one (although now much reduced by development). The other Late Saxon boroughs of East Anglia lie beneath modern towns, the necessity for a research-oriented archaeological approach being therefore all the more necessary.

The ranking of settlements can be undertaken in a crude way by analysing the mint data but the potential exists for a more sophisticated approach which will enable towns to be assessed as elements within the local and regional economy, rather than simply as adjuncts of royal power and control. The political dimension of towns must also be explored, nevertheless; it has recently been shown that the town as a political concept is a valid area of archaeological study (Carver 1993) while, at a detailed level, there is now some evidence to suggest that the spectacular growth of Norwich in the 11th century was, in part, the result of deliberate policy rather than fortuitous happenstance as a result of a favourable geographical position (Ayers forthcoming).

The importance of individuals and institutions in urban growth must not be underestimated; obvious examples for study in the pre-Conquest period are Bury St Edmunds and Waltham Abbey although the importance of both lay and ecclesiastical magnates can also be explored elsewhere. Post-Conquest foundations such as that of the Bishop of Norwich at Lynn or the Bishop of London at Chelmsford can be cited as towns where evidence can be sought for the impact of such plantations upon the hinterland as well as for a deeper understanding of the concepts of urbanism as understood at the time of foundation and as mutated in subsequent centuries.

The inter-relationship of urban settlements needs to be examined through archaeological data as well as historical sources. The East Anglian urban landscape is atypical, being characterised by a few very large towns with varying numbers of smaller settlements. Indeed, it could be argued that, just as Norwich came to dominate much of the economy of northern East Anglia, so London dominated the south.

This dominance of great towns became even more marked in the medieval period, with London and Norwich certainly becoming ever more complex societies. The decline of other towns, such as Ipswich and Thetford, is an under-explored area while the rapid growth of coastal ports, large (Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn), medium (Harwich) and small (Wiveton), provides examples of specialist towns at an early period.

Notwithstanding the growth of great towns, there remains much to investigate concerning the origins of other urban settlements. Bassett (1982) is a rare example of a small town study. In Suffolk, besides Ipswich, burgesses are recorded at Dunwich, Eye, Sudbury, Beccles and Clare by 1086 with, additionally, markets recorded at Thorney (Stowmarket), Kelsale, Hoxne and Haverhill. The only one of these towns where there has been a systematic attempt to understand urban development is Ipswich (with some limited work also in Sudbury). In Hertfordshire, it is likely that the towns of Berkhamstead, Hitchin, St Albans, Ashwell and Standon have pre-Conquest origins but evidence is currently lacking. A survey of towns in Essex has been undertaken (Eddy and Petchey 1983) but the paucity of basic data collection and analysis across the region needs to be addressed.

The status of towns gradually becomes more legally-defined in the medieval period but archaeological work has much to offer in determining socio-economic status from primary data. This can be explored at local level in order to understand the relationships within a borough, regionally with regard to inter-town connections and nationally concerning the impact of towns on the body politic.

The complexity of urban organisation must be examined archaeologically as it is only from a deeper understanding of the interweave of social and economic relationships that it will be possible to comprehend the importance of towns as institutions. Data as diverse as environmental material, artefacts, raw materials, geographic location and built structures will all contribute to a greater awareness of the contribution of towns to medieval society. As a single example, the importance of built structures to an understanding of social organisation is becoming increasingly apparent as a result of recent theoretical work (*e.g.* Johnson 1993). The adaptation of towns or parts of towns as circumstances change is also an informative area of study: the impact of castle, cathedral or friary imposition in the medieval period is paralleled by the growth of industrial manufacture towards the end of the 18th century while the results of periods of change such as the Reformation can be identified and characterised through examination of archaeological sites and monuments.

This study of social organisation must investigate the entire range of the urban experience. Topography, buildings, craft production, markets, waterfront facilities, defences, ecclesiastical institutions, cemeteries and environmental evidence all need to be evaluated and the available information synthesised. The interdisciplinary opportunities offered by towns are great and, to date, have only been exploited at a handful of places (*e.g.* Carter 1978).

IV. Economy

Archaeological evidence has much to offer any study of the urban economy and of the inter-relationship between urban activity and the produce of the countryside (*e.g.* Hall and Kenward (eds) 1994). Fundamental problems of the change from a subsistence economy to one of surplus need to be investigated so that the preconditions for urban growth within post-Roman society are more fully

Figure 11 Prospect of Norwich *c.* 1581 by Georg Hoefnagle. Viewed from the west with the spire of the cathedral visible in the centre

understood. Allied to this, the early development of the mechanics of exchange and trade, particularly in relation to political expediency but also with regard to a developing merchant class, can be explored.

Within East Anglia, the only urban settlement where a comprehensive assessment of the early economy has been attempted is Ipswich. There remains a great deal of basic data to extract from sites of potential such as Norwich but much useful information will probably derive from study of other sites which were, at best, merely proto-urban, such as Brandon or Burnham (Norfolk) or early sites on the Fen edge.

Isolating the potential range of economic activity will help assessment of the diversity of trade and therefore commercial life. Communications need to be studied, together with status of trade links and their potential for stimulating urban growth. There is increasing evidence of contact between east coast ports and the Frankish Empire; it is less clear whether this contact represents the gradual development of a market economy or a more constrained sequence of exchange with little impact upon everyday society.

Once again, the impact of the Danes is a major consideration. It is probable that urban economies were stimulated towards growth in the last decades of the 9th century, so much so that by the second quarter of the 10th century, boroughs like Norwich, Ipswich and Colchester were able to form integral parts of the administration of the region.

The development of craft industries has long been recognised as a key component of urban growth and detailed appraisals of the processes and products of these industries remain important elements of study. Great strides have been made in gaining a better understanding of the importance of the pre-Conquest East Anglian ceramic traditions (*e.g.* Atkin *et al*. 1983) but more remains to be done in terms of synthetic work on distribution and patterns of trade as well as in consideration of the detail of the industries themselves. The pottery industry, however, is only the most visible such craft activity and there remains little work in depth on other aspects of the Late Saxon economy.

The effects upon that economy of the Norman Conquest have frequently been targetted but the Saxo-Norman period remains one where the growth of the urban economy is still only marginally understood, the influence of towns within the national economy requiring much greater study. The gradual growth of towns, particularly from the 12th century onward, has yet to be examined comprehensively with the role of small towns being almost ignored. Nearly 40 places in Suffolk had the right to hold a market by the end of the 15th century; clearly only a proportion of these developed into significant towns but the impact of each on the local economy and the overall impact upon urban/rural relationships remains to be explored. Understanding of the complexity of the medieval urban economy remains rudimentary in terms of processes and the mechanics of exchange. In particular, the potential for developing an understanding of such processes through study of international trade and contacts, especially with Scandinavia, the Baltic, the Low Countries and Germany, is very great. Much can be demonstrated from documentation and artefacts with regard to products but how production, output, distribution and exchange effected the urban environment and society in general is less clear.

This is true with perhaps greater force in the post-medieval period where attempts to explore the urban economy through archaeological material are rare. There has been little examination of post-medieval industrial processes in towns and much potential information

concerning commercial activity could be obtained from a targetted approach to the potential of archaeological material. Once again, relationships with the hinterland need careful consideration in order to assess more fully the role of any one town as well as towns in general within the overall socio-economic framework.

V. Culture and Religion

It can be argued that, while towns provide food, shelter and security, they also foster spiritual nourishment. This less tangible attribute is one rarely acknowledged as a preserve of archaeology and yet it is one which can and should be addressed as an area crucial to the development of any civilised society and certainly of central significance to west European culture.

The importance of the church as an influence in urban development is undeniable with church buildings and locations remaining determinants within modern urban topography. The relationship of the church to urban origins and growth is a fundamental consideration in any urban settlement and needs to be studied at a variety of levels. While the parish is a basic building block within urban society, the inter-relationship of parishes and their contextual location imparts much useful information and demands attention.

The role of larger ecclesiastical institutions within urban areas is one which is but infrequently explored by archaeologists. Details of friary layout and hospital plan are becoming more common but the impact of such institutions upon the surrounding urban, and indeed rural, area is little studied. At an economic level, the creation of church buildings and their ancillary structures and support systems was a crucial stimulant to growth and archaeological assessments of the impact of the church as both client and innovator need to be undertaken. The diversity of the urban economy owes much to the church with its extensive requirements.

The church was influential in the spread of material culture but such distribution was assisted by the cosmopolitan nature of towns. The richness of urban archaeology, both above and below ground and especially for the later medieval and post-medieval period, ensures that towns offer unique opportunities for examination of material culture and the mechanics of its dissemination to the wider community. The manner in which the urban experience influenced the development of distinct cultures can also be explored archaeologically. Technological innovation, artistic developments and the adoption of new materials and practices can be examined within an urban context, individual towns frequently developing distinctive products which exploited a general growth in commercial activity and imparted a cosmopolitan approach to everyday society. Archaeological methodologies need to recognise that urban culture itself is distinctive and must be examined in order to study the processes of urbanisation.

VI. Environment and Economy

by P. Murphy

A question of particular interest is how 'urban' were the earliest post-Roman town populations: were they, from their beginnings, primarily engaged in consumption and re-distribution, or is there evidence for agricultural production and processing? Thus far, it has not been possible to demonstrate pre-urban agricultural phases conclusively from biological evidence.

At Fishergate, Norwich, 10th-century ditches cut into valley floor peats produced a wet grassland plant macrofossil assemblage suggesting local pasture or meadow. The ditches were, however, infilled with typical urban refuse — bone, plant food wastes and a synanthropic insect fauna with woodworm beetle, flea and louse. (Kenward and Allison 1994; Murphy 1994b), and were subsequently covered by dumped refuse layers. At Ipswich, charred crop remains from both Middle and Late Saxon deposits consisted mainly of grain with, overall, very little chaff or weed seeds: there was virtually no evidence for on-site primary crop processing (Murphy 1987, 1991a and in prep.). Bread wheat was the main crop, followed by rye, hulled barley, and oats, with horse-bean, pea and hemp. Charred germinated grains of barley from Middle Saxon contexts and charred masses of hops from Late Saxon ones indicated malting and brewing. Burnt 11th-century cellared buildings included dense charred granary deposits of oats and barley: in one case coarsely ground oat/barley malt grist, associated with charred loaves of wheat/rye flour.

Very similar results have recently been obtained from pre-Castle deposits at Castle Mall, Norwich (Murphy, in prep.). Again, the main activities represented were cereal storage and malt-drying. Evidence for malting has also come from medieval ovens at Alms Lane, Norwich (Murphy 1985a) and Redcastle Furze, Thetford (Murphy 1995a). A few deposits of unprocessed crops have been recovered at Norwich: at St Martin-at-Palace Plain a batch of very small-grained rye and barley with chaff, straw and abundant leguminous weeds was thought to indicate cultivation of nitrogen-depleted soils (Murphy 1988b). However, the vast majority of samples from the city were grain-dominated, and thus of 'consumer-type'.

At all urban sites investigated, latrine pits including a wide range of mineral-replaced and waterlogged plant food residues were present. For example, 11th-century and later pits at St Martin-at-Palace Plain (Murphy 1988b) produced remains of cereals, pulses, flax, hemp, opium poppy, celery, fennel, coriander, hop and many fruitstones and seeds, including 'exotics' such as medlar, mulberry, grape and fig. In general, early pits include few 'exotics' and more macrofossils of wild fruits. Latrine pits, it should be noted, are rarely encountered at rural sites, and their presence from the earliest phases at Norwich and Ipswich may imply that human waste was not being agriculturally re-cycled.

The growth of urban populations inevitably increased demands for supplies of food and other raw materials. Mammal bone assemblages from Middle Saxon Ipswich and Late Saxon and medieval Norwich were dominated by cattle, with sheep, pig and traces of goat and horse (Crabtree 1994; Jones 1994). Deer and other wild animals were rare, though rabbits (from managed warrens initially) were relatively common at some sites by the later Middle Ages (Cartledge 1988). The relatively large assemblage of bird bones from Alms Lane was mainly of domestic fowl and goose, but included wildfowl (Harman 1985). At Colchester, cattle and sheep were the most important stock animals in the Middle Ages. Wool production was of great importance, and continued so until recent times, but during the post-medieval period there was a dramatic increase in

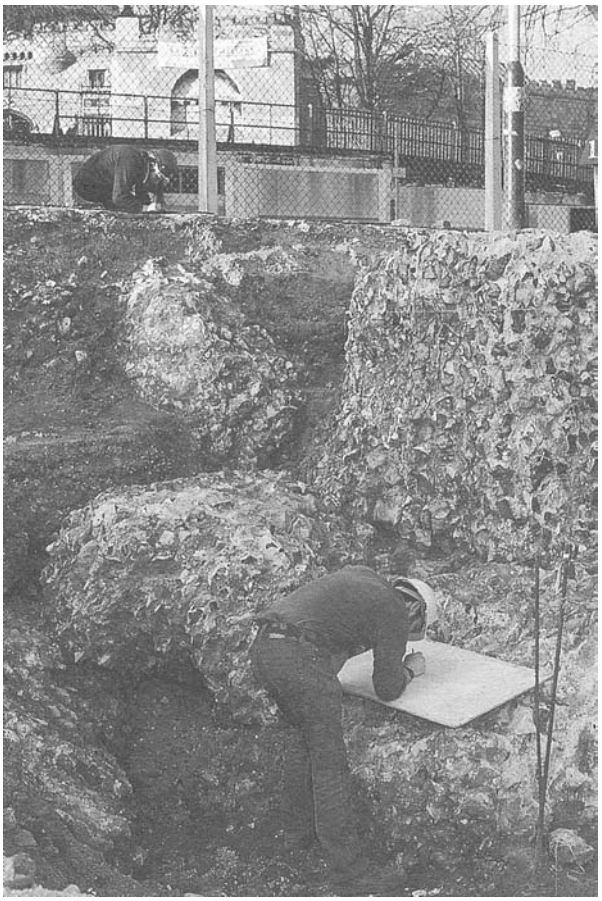

Plate VIII Excavation of 'barbican' gateway at Castle Mall, Norwich. This fragment lies on its side and was probably deliberately demolished in the 18th century. *Photo: Kirk Laws-Chapman, copyright Norfolk Museums Service*

veal and milk production (Luff 1993, 127–138). Studies of mortality profiles should provide further data on the ways in which local farms adapted their economies to the urban demand for meat and other products. A large animal bone assemblage, spanning the 9th to 18th centuries, has recently been reported from Castle Mall, Norwich (Albarella, in prep.). Beef was the main meat eaten at all periods, though pork was important in the early phases and mutton in the later: most material was butchery and food refuse, though the working of bone, horn, antler and leather were represented. Assemblage composition indicates that there was local stock-rearing up until post-medieval times, which (apart from pig-rearing), ceased thereafter. From late and post-medieval deposits there is evidence for increased animal size, (notably of domestic fowl), and for morphological changes related to the 'agricultural revolution'.

Marine food resources were also increasingly exploited. At Culver Street, Colchester fish bones were markedly more common in Medieval deposits than Roman ones: mean 5.5 bones/litre of soil compared to 1.8 bones/litre (Locker 1992). Eel, herring and cod were most abundant, freshwater fish very rare. Locker suggests that a specialised Medieval fishing industry based on netting for herring and line fisheries for cod was represented. Fishbones are exceedingly common in Saxon and medieval urban deposits at Norwich and elsewhere: the overwhelming predominance of herring, with eel, cod and whiting and other species is quite consistent (Jones and Scott 1985; Locker 1988, 1994). Marine mollusc shell is likewise common: besides the predominant oyster, mussel, cockle, winkle and whelk, other species including razorshells were consumed. At Fishergate, Norwich abundant shells of small inedible marine species were probably refuse from the cleaning of a catch prior to sale (Murphy 1994b). Most marine crustacean remains from Norwich post-date the early 15th century, implying that the products of the Cromer Crab fishery were not reaching Norwich in quantity before then (Murphy 1985b).

Urban development would obviously have increased demand for fuel and constructional wood and timber. Recent work at Castle Mall (Murphy, in prep.) has shown that fuel wood was supplemented by heathland fuels (heathers, gorse/broom — perhaps supplied as charcoal), crop processing waste and peat (though the latter has proved difficult to demonstrate incontrovertibly). Middle and Late Saxon waterfront structures at Bridge Street, Ipswich and St Martin-at-Palace, Norwich were mostly of roundwood, but later structures included more timber, mostly of oak (Murphy 1988b, in prep.). Saxon well-linings at Ipswich included one constructed of re-used barrel-staves with a tree-ring sequence spanning AD 539–744, and matching chronologies from Mid-South Germany (Groves 1987, 1987a; Hillam 1989). Burnt 11th- century cellared buildings from Ipswich were mostly of oak timber, but included hazel wattling and various charred wooden items, including basketry of willow and hazel (Murphy 1987, 1990). Pine was present, perhaps imported, and a deal plank also came from a 14th/15th- century revetment at Bridge Street. Charcoal from burnt late medieval buildings at Pottergate, Norwich showed attack by ash bark beetle and death watch beetle (Murphy 1985b).

Evidence for social status of site occupants has rarely been demonstrated. The abundance of 'exotic' plant foods from a 15th-century latrine at St Martin-at-Palace Plain (Murphy 1988, 121) is notable. Refuse deposits in the Barbican well and other deposits at Castle Mall did not produce dietary evidence for high-status occupants (Albarella, Murphy, in prep.), even though this was the site of a Royal castle. Parasitic nematode ova have been reported from Norwich (Jones 1994), whilst dumped 11th- century layers at Fishergate included an insect fauna indicating abundant decomposing material, with human bedbug and flea (Kenward and Allison 1994). There is little evidence for post-medieval introductions of exotic species, apart from a 17th-century turkey at Alms Lane, and pumpkin/marrow and parrot from Castle Mall (Albarella, Murphy, in prep).

VII. Conclusion

The potential of towns for dramatically increasing knowledge concerning the growth of pan-European economies and societies at a formative period in western culture must not be underestimated. The information base is still inadequately sampled and the urban potential of deposits, buildings, artefacts, ecofacts and palaeo-ecological diversity ensures that towns remains priority areas for research.

In general terms each of the major towns of East Anglia should be regarded as a single, exceptionally complex, site with potential for increasing understanding

of urban communities in general and local communities in particular. The interaction of such communities with the local environment and the rural hinterland must be seen as a major area of research development. Archaeological research in towns should view the entire urban environment as worthy of study, particular emphasis being placed on topography and buildings as well as below ground features and deposits (Ayers 1993). Waterfront deposits are especially important in this regard.

The slow growth of other, smaller, towns must also be examined. Here, the ports of the north and east coast are important, having considerable potential for developing understanding of commercial activity and port provision.

Towns in East Anglia contain the greatest densities of rich medieval deposits, surviving buildings, churches, industries, artefact assemblages, documents and varieties of palaeoecological data in the region. Settlement sites vary from one of the greatest cities in western Europe to abandoned ports. Urban research needs to capitalise upon the potential of towns in order to develop a more coherent understanding of the contribution of the region to national and international society.

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